R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 015 984 UD 004 726

URBAN SCHOOLS FOR AN OPEN SOCIETY.

BY- FISCHER, JOHN H.

PUB DATE NOV 67

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.80 18P.

DESCRIPTORS- *URBAN SCHOOLS, *PUBLIC EDUCATION, *DISADVANTAGED YOUTH, *EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES, PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS, COMPENSATORY EDUCATION, EQUAL EDUCATION, EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION, ADMINISTRATIVE CHANGE, SCHOOL INTEGRATION, PUBLIC SUPPORT, SCHOOL ORGANIZATION,

DESPITE THE AMERICAN CREDO OF EQUAL OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL, "UNEQUAL EDUCATION" MAY BE NEEDED TO ENABLE EVERY CHILD TO DEVELOP HIS POTENTIAL TO "COMPETE ON FAIR TERMS" WITH THE REST OF SOCIETY, ESPECIALLY THOSE CHILDREN WHO ARE HANDICAPPED BY DISADVANTAGEMENT AND RACIAL DISCRIMINATION. BUT COMPENSATORY EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR THIS GROUP WILL NOT BE MAXIMALLY EFFECTIVE UNLESS THEY MEET THE DISADVANTAGED CHILD'S INDIVIDUAL NEEDS. FOR THIS CHILD A PLANNED LEARNING EXPERIENCE SHOULD BEGIN WELL BEFORE THE AGE OF SIX AND, THEREFORE, EVERY CITY SHOULD HAVE UNIVERSAL KINDERGARTENS FOR FIVE-YEAR-OLDS AND PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS FOR FOUR-YEAR-OLDS. TO CAPITALIZE ON THE GAINS OF EARLY PROGRAMS, THE PRIMARY GRADES SHOULD FOLLOW THROUGH WITH WELL-PLANNED INSTRUCTION AND GOOD TEACHING PROCEDURES. IN ADDITION, INNOVATIONS IN CURRICULUMS, IN PEDAGOGICAL PROCEDURES, AND IN THE USE OF COMMUNITY RESOURCES SHOULD BE MORE WIDESPREAD AND GIVEN FAR GREATER REWARD AND RECOGNITION. AT THE SAME TIME, SCHOOL INTEGRATION WITHIN A FRAMEWORK OF QUALITY EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INTEGRATION MUST BE GIVEN TOP PRIORITY. AND THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF SCHOOL SYSTEMS SHOULD BE REFORMED TO MEET CURRENT AND FUTURE COMMUNITY NEEDS AND DEVELOPMENT. BUT THIS RESPONSIBILITY IS NOT THE SCHOOLS' ALONE BUT ALSO THAT OF ALL URBAN PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS. THIS PAPER WAS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY AT THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY IN AMERICA'S CITIES, SPONSORED BY THE U.S. COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS, WASHINGTON, D.C., NOVEMBER 16-18, 1967. (NH)

ED015984

04726

URBAN SCHOOLS FOR AN OPEN SOCIETY

John H. Fischer
President, Teachers College
Columbia University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

for delivery November 16, 1967 at the National Conference
on Equal Educational Opportunity in America's Cities
Sponsored by the
U. S. Commission on Civil Rights
Washington, D. C.

UD 004 726

The American public school system is the world's most comprehensive and fruitful experiment in universal education, but the very impressiveness of its past accomplishments now throws into sharp contrast the schools' present shortcomings. There are indeed some critics who consider the current performance of city schools so poor and their resistance to change so adamant that they propose replacing publicly controlled systems with publicly subsidized independent schools.

To many who work in the schools, it seems not only odd but unjust that these judgments should be so severe after twenty years of quite remarkable

reform and improvement. For it is true that American schools have changed in significant ways in the last two decades. Immediately following World War II came the campaigns to raise standards, to emphasize the solid subjects, and to do more for able students. Even the academicians, having become newly conscious of the schools' existence, joined in efforts to improve them. With useful consequences, if for the wrong reasons, Sputnik frightened the Congress and the country into strengthening programs in mathematics, physical science, foreign languages and guidance. Despite a few examples of excessive zeal and some false starts, the results of these successive developments on the whole have been good. So many better educated youngsters emerged from the high schools that the upward thrust of entering freshmen even helped to modernize higher education.

But the earlier reforms, those that occurred before 1960, were motivated mainly by a concern for academic values, by apprehension over what had been happening to subjects and standards. By contrast, the rise of the civil rights movement redressed the balance and swung the spotlight of criticism back to focus on students as individual human beings and centered it particularly on the Negro student who, despite Brown and subsequent decisions, was still being denied opportunities his contemporaries enjoyed. To this newer criticism the response has been less prompt and less effective than the earlier reaction. Part of the difference is attributable to prejudice, part to inertia, and part to lack of community interest. But the principal reason for the slower rate of change is that the problems of providing inclusive, relevant, effective education under the present conditions of urban life require insights, attitudes and types of competence that too few teachers and administrators now possess. The solution of these problems also requires fundamental changes in educational policy and in the arrangements by which that policy is determined.

To be sure, the schools are often held accountable for failures which they have neither the means nor the opportunity to correct. Not even the best school or the most dedicated teacher can guarantee that all the pupils will finish the year above the grade median. Nor can every child be assured a place in college, however strongly his parents may demand equal treatment. But the excessive casualty rates of the schools can be neither explained nor excused by statistics. Nor are they all the inevitable result of unfortunate heredity, broken homes, or bad community influences. Before we can project educational solutions we must understand the character of the problems to which we are attempting to respond.

The complexity of the situation can be seen in the gaps that separate less fortunate Americans from the majority of their countrymen. Not only are these gaps disgracefully wide; in certain cases they are actually widening. Most of these inequities are related to poverty, many are aggravated by racial discrimination, and all contribute to the handicapping circumstances within which and against which the school must carry on its work. Let me cite a few comparisons.

Non-white infant mortality in 1940 was 70 percent worse than the white rate. In 1960 it was 90 percent worse.

Maternal mortality among non-white mothers in 1940 was 2.4 times the white rate. In 1960 it was 3.8 times the white rate.

A Negro boy born in 1962 had as much chance of surviving to 20 as a white boy had of reaching 37. A Negro girl could look forward to reaching 20 as confidently as a white girl to reaching 42.

In employment, the best years for Negroes only come up to the recession levels for whites. In 1964, a prosperous year, when white unemployment dropped to less than 3.5 percent, the Negro rate was still almost ten percent. That was half again as high as the worst white rate since the depression. These figures are for adults, 20 and older. For 16 and 17 year old Negroes, unemployment has not dropped below 20 percent in ten years.

There is, of course, a close relation between these data and educational conditions. The median years of school completed by persons over 25 in 1940 was 8.7 for whites but 5.8 for non-whites. By 1960 the non-whites had reached 8.2, still half a year below where the whites had been twenty years earlier. Meanwhile, the white median had risen to 10.9 years.

But, some argue, things are better now than they used to be. They are better, but far from good. In 1960 the percent of Negro men college graduates aged 25 to 29 was 15.6 percent for whites and 5.3 percent for Negroes. That meant that in 1960 the Negroes were where the whites had been in 1920. In high school graduation, the gap is closing faster. The Negro rate in 1960 equalled the white in 1940.

The Selective Service Mental Test is a constant reminder that the educational gap is still tragically wide for our present 18 year olds. The variation among the states is well known, but the differential figures on white and Negro registrants are not as widely circulated. For the country as a whole, the failure rate is about 25 percent. Between June, 1964 and December, 1965, the rate for white applicants was 19 percent, for Negroes 67 percent. Failures among whites ranged from 5 percent in the state of Washington to 43 percent in Tennessee. For Negroes the range was from 25 percent in

Washington to 85 percent in South Carolina. Those who think that the determining factor is race rather than education might note that Negroes in the state of Washington did better than whites in eight other states. Negroes in Rhode Island surpassed the whites of six other states. The poor showing of city schools is not attributable simply to the influx of Negro children. It is due rather to the failure of the schools to respond to the special problems of American youngsters who are the victims of deprivation, neglect, and prejudice.

In order for the schools to respond as promptly and as effectively as they should to these conditions, it seems to me that three things are necessary:

1. We must reconsider the principle of equal opportunity.

2. We must devise more effective ways to adapt schools to the children they serve.

3. We must reconstruct existing arrangements for policy making and school administration.

II

In the whole American credo, no tenet is more firmly fixed than our devotion to equal opportunity. We cite it constantly as the fundamental principle in the whole structure of public education. We assert with great pride that in these schools every American child finds his birthright of opportunity and gets the start that will enable him to make his way as a free man in a free land. The race, we say, is to the swift, but it is open to all, and everyone who appears at the starting line is allowed to run. This system, we have long told ourselves, assures equality of opportunity. And so it does -- for

most. But always there are those who, for no fault of their own, cannot make it to the line before the gun is fired. Among them are good runners, but they never really get into the running that counts. Others get to the track determined to run and eager to win, but, having been barefoot all their lives, they must first learn to wear the spikes that the rules require. Before they can learn, their race is over. To be sure, we treat all the entrants with meticulous equality. What we overlook is that "the equal treatment of unequals produces neither equality nor justice."

To offer all children equal education remains a necessary beginning, for even in our most affluent cities many thousands still have nothing remotely approaching equality of schooling. But equality among schools is only the first step. We must set our sights not on making schools equal, but on devising whatever means are required to enable every child to develop his own potential. Whatever his possibilities, wherever he begins, he should have the help he needs to reach maturity prepared to compete on fair terms in an open society. To live with this conception of equal opportunity, the community must be willing and the school must be able to furnish unequal education. Unequal education to promote equal opportunity may seem a radical proposal, but it is in fact a well-established practice. This is precisely what has long been done for physically and mentally handicapped children under the name of "special education." As it has been offered to these minorities, what we now call compensatory education is universally approved. But the largest minority of our children are not the crippled and mentally retarded. They are the millions who suffer the handicaps of sustained deprivation and neglect much of it due to racial discrimination. The time has come to provide unequal, exceptional education as a matter of deliberate public policy to every child who needs it

Lip service to the principle of compensatory education in itself will solve nothing. It only points up another puzzling issue, for much of what has been done under this label in the past half dozen years has proved disappointing. The United States Civil Rights Commission, in its report, "Racial Isolation in the Public Schools," describes a number of such efforts and concludes that "the programs did not show evidence of much success." Coleman's massive study, "Equality of Educational Opportunity," similarly found that existing teaching practices and curricula do little to counteract the effects of isolation or deprivatic

Nevertheless, it would be indefensible at this point to dismiss the concept of compensation as useless. Even though both Coleman and the Commission find integration to be more beneficial than compensation, the fact remains that in many cities the attainment of complete integration cannot be expected soon. Even if it were instantly possible, many children are so seriously retarded academically that if they could be placed in integrated schools today they would still need a great deal of special help. Whether such teaching is called preventive, remedial, corrective, or developmental, it must be designed to meet the unusual individual requirements of children for whom present programs are inadequate.

The finding of the Coleman study that may ultimately turn out to be the most significant of all is that students with a sense of control over their own destiny do better in school than those who are convinced that what they do will have little effect on their ultimate opportunities. Ways must be found to create more schools where children will find that they are respected, that they can be successful, and that what they do does make a difference.

The complications of cultural difference and ethnic prejudice were not unknown in the public schools of an earlier day. In 1901 when the United States Industrial Commission investigated conditions in city slums, it was Italian youngsters who were being characterized as irresponsible, difficult to discipline, and not so bright. As one teacher put it, they "were fair students, better than the Irish, but not as good as the Hebrews and the Germans. . ." Now, as then, many promising efforts fail because they rest on stereotypes and deal with categories rather than with persons. While it is inevitably necessary to work with children in groups, whether in schools, classes, or in teaching units of two or three, the only acceptable compensatory approach is to identify their needs as individuals. The best teacher begins with each child where he is, engaging his interest through activities that make sense to him, and steadily encouraging him toward new encounters and fresh discoveries. Thus, from each new day's succe: the child accumulates the confidence to try a bit more than he managed the day before.

This process must begin early. It becomes increasingly clear that children have a better chance to succeed in school if they are introduced to planned learning experiences well before the age of six. An immediately available forward step for every city is to make kindergartens universally available for five-year-olds and to establish pre-school programs for four-year-olds. This step is especially urgent for those most in need of the benefits that such programs at their best can provide.

Most of us here are acquainted with evidence that the level of intellectual capability young people will achieve by 17 is already half determined by age four and that another 30 percent is predictable by age seven. This is no ground for

believing that a child's academic fate is sealed by his seventh birthday, but it means that a community that seriously wants to improve its children's opportunities will start them to school early. In terms of sheer economy, it can be shown that the earlier the investment in systematic intellectual development is begun, the greater will be the rate of return.

Some of the early follow-up studies of children in Head Start programs have been interpreted as meaning that such early programs have no effect on subsequent success in the primary grades. It is much more likely that what has actually been discovered is the failure of primary grade teachers to build upon the gains made at the preschool level. Even the best preschool programs will produce only temporary benefits unless the follow-through at the primary level is well planned. In the middle and secondary years, as well, curricula and teaching procedures must be designed to build on the progress of earlier stages and to introduce the new emphases appropriate at each level.

III

Relevance in the curriculum,respect for the student, and the continuous cultivation of his capability, self-confidence, and self-esteem should permeate the entire school program. But if we are to have such programs soon enough in every urban school, the speed of reform will have to be much faster than it has been. The obvious question is how to speed things up. The equally obvious answer would appear to be to invent new curricula, new teaching procedures, better teaching materials, more effective uses of technology, and improved school organization. That all of these are needed is beyond doubt, but we need

something else even more. Our present shortcomings are due less to the state of the pedagogic art than to the state of mind of the artists. Not only teachers, but administrators, board members, and parents alike almost invariably approa these new problems assuming that they can be solved without any fundamental change in the nature of the school itself. We should by now be able to see that much of what must be done cannot be fitted into the customary institutional form

There are, to be sure, schools which have abandoned egg-crate architec and with it the image of teachers as interchangeable parts to be distributed, one to thirty children, equally throughout the building. But most schools, even whe the need for innovation is most pressing, have yet to make the first break towar anything remotely resembling a teaching team. The utility of the flexible prima unit, in which several teachers work jointly with one group of children for two t four years, has been well demonstrated; but the idea speads ever so slowly, because it calls for a fundamentally different pattern of professional practice an school organization.

At the secondary level, despite the evidence that adolescents are both able and eager to work on their own, only a handful of teachers will really trust them to learn out of the teacher's sight. Every community, most notably the large city, presents a priceless collection of living laboratories for learning about the modern world and how it works. Amid this wealth the typical school is managed as though real education could occur only on its premises. Long before deTocqueville commented on force of voluntarism in this country, Ameri cans were tapping the committed energy of volunteers to get things done, yet we still hesitate to use this magnificent source of help as freely as we should in the schools.

In mentioning these practices I am aware that each of them is, in fact, already being used in schools. They are, to be sure, but the point is that almos' everywhere they are considered exceptional. As variations from long establishe custom they are suspect. In the face of the new tasks now being laid upon the schools, and the consequent need for better learning and more effective teachin such changes as these and others far bolder should not only be tolerated; they should be expected, insisted upon, and rewarded.

Among the necessary changes in school policy and practice none are mor urgently needed now than those that will speed racial integration. Thirteen yea after the Supreme Court's declaration that segregated schools are inherently unequal, the number of segregated Negro students is still on the rise. Although reluctance to change has not wholly disappeared and sheer defiance of the law is still evident in some places, the lack of progress now in most cities is due to conditions that are more resistant to analysis and far more difficult to correct. The most impressive fact in the situation is the steady increase in the number and proportion of Negroes in the central cities of our metropolitan areas and the even sharper rise in the proportion of Negro students in the public schools of those cities. As the ghetto within the city expands into a virtual ghetto city, eve the most resolute and ingenious school authorities find meaningful desegregatior beyond their own capabilities. The easy course in such circumstances -- and a plausible one -- is to argue that nothing can be done and that the inevitable must be accepted. But the inevitable in this case means perpetuating the cycle of segregated schooling, denying both Negro and white children integrated experiences and extending into the next generation the grievous tensions that plague this one. If that cycle cannot be broken within the present context of school

systems and community structures, ways must be found to change that context. To continue for the indefinite future the socially and personally destructive evils of a segregated society is a choice this nation cannot afford and may not survive

Three possible courses, at least, are open to us. In those cities where the problem is not yet overwhelming, steps can be taken, as on a limited scale White Plains has recently demonstrated, to abolish segregated Negro schools and by concerted action to redistribute children of all groups in ratios that will lead to stable, viable student bodies.

In other communities where the proportions of Negro pupils are higher, cooperative schemes for pupil exchanges, possibly including the establishment of school parks, may be developed with neighboring suburban districts.

In yet other cases, state educational authorities may have to act under the clause of the Brown decision which holds that "the opportunity of an education . . . where the state has undertaken to provide it is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms." This would appear to require that where inequality exists, and where other steps to effect equity have failed, the state is obligated to take whatever corrective action may be necessary.

To propose action in any community contrary to the will of a substantial body of the citizens is to propose trouble, but there is reason to believe that the resistance to change that has impeded integration in many places is due less to recalcitrance or prejudice than to simpler and more tractable causes. In many cases it is probable that parents -- of both races -- only want reasonable assurance that the schools their children attend after integration will be at least equal and preferably superior, to those to which they have been accustomed. Plans for integration should therefore include for all the children involved provisions that will respond to this understandable concern of their parents.

Another principle that becomes increasingly clear is that any plan for school integration is projected at considerable risk if it is not closely relate to a broad scale, comprehensive plan for stable community integration. Witho the support and cooperation of the other major segments of community action and authority, it is wholly unrealistic to expect the school to carry alone the burden of creating a new pattern of community association.

In arguing for comprehensive approaches to school and community integration I am not suggesting that the school authorities should wait patientl for every other agency to move first. There are ways in which the schools must and can act to meet their own responsibilities. Moreover, the educatio forces of the community should be prepared to exercise leadership in their ow field and to offer it to others, but leadership is meaningless unless it is part o a reciprocal relationship. The reform of public education in regard to integra tion, no less than to the instruction of the disadvantaged or the nurture of the highly gifted, must be a widely shared concern. Slightly paraphrasing Plato, we can be confident that only where such reform is commonly honored is it ver likely to be cultivated.

IV

My final point is that we must reconstruct the arrangements for school governance in the city. Whether one starts from the position of the superinte dent, the board, the teachers, the children, or the public, it becomes increas- ingly difficult to justify the outmoded ways in which we continue to conduct the affairs of city schools.

To call this the decentralization question is to oversimplify both the problem and the solution. The issue is not whether a particular city should ha· one public school system, or five, or fifty. That is a matter of detail. The issue is, rather, how to plan, manage, and use the educational possibilities of the city to meet the pressures of the times, the students' needs, and the publ: interest. In any city, the public schools are the largest single element in the total educational enterprise, but they are by no means the whole of it. The tradition of separatism that has so long dominated public school policy and administration has become anachronistic. The mechanisms initially designed to protect the schools from partisan or corrupt political influence, however necessary they once were, now tend to isolate the schools from other agencies and to insulate them from normal political processes.

In the city, as in the nation, every important undertaking today has its educational aspect. Many projects have no future at all unless they can count on effective schools. An intricate network of relationships ties the families of every community to its economic, cultural, political and social institutions With virtually all of these agencies and many of the families, the school is connected in mutual dependence. Yet among school boards, administrators and university people, there are many who still think that these connections call for no more than routine courtesies, prudent "public relations," and a vigilant watch against any sign of encroachment on the school's traditional prerogatives.

Urban planning that does not now include educational planning is not on' unrealistic; it is irresponsible. Such planning must moreover go far beyond a perfunctory review by the planning body of the size and location of new school

sites. It must confront questions of curriculum, attendance patterns, teacher supply, financial support; in brief, the whole complex interrelationship between the development of schools and the total development of the city. The need for such planning is crucial and so is the manner in which it is done. Not only the central planning agency, but the school authorities, other public and private agencies, and the municipal and state governments must accept jointly the responsibility for projecting goals and setting timetables, and they must also share the responsibility for seeing that commitments are met.

Only by adopting educational strategies commensurate with the charact and scope of its objectives can any city hope to surmount the constant need to react to one school crisis after another. The community that neglects the deve opment of a long-range, broad-scale plan of educational development, or fails to commit to that plan the resources necessary to execute it, is neglecting its own future.

At the other end of the system, in the individual school, where the whc business succeeds or fails, there are other needs for reform. The demonstrations and boycotts, to say nothing of the thousands of less publicized complaints that have plagued the schools are symptoms of deeply serious problems. To be sure, not everyone who criticizes a principal is wholly objective. There are no doubt occasional picketers whose zeal for school reform is diluted by other ambitions. But when all the extraneous interests have been allowed for, there remain the just and proper grievances of parents who often are denied even a respectful reception, much less a voice, in the schools their children are required to attend.

Despite the accumulations of resentment, pride, and defensiveness that encumber those situations, ways can be devised to involve parents more deeply in school affairs. A first step is to lift the controversies beyond the adversary level. So long as school people and parents view each other as opponents to be defeated, the likelihood of positive results is negligible. What is needed is a sustained, patient effort to build and maintain channels through which each gro may express its views and be assured of respectful attention and consideration by the other. A second step is to systematize these exchanges, turning them t constructive deliberation and providing the substantive data necessary to enabl the participants to make responsible choices and projections. A third step is a thoroughgoing analysis of the nature of school policy issues to determine at wha level the different types can best be handled. Some should be settled within the school, some at intermediate points, and others on a city-wide basis. The hea of the matter is to find the means by which a city school board can maintain a common floor of opportunity for every pupil in the city and at the same time encourage parents, citizens, and school staff members to apply their own initi tive in raising their school as far as possible above the basic level.

V

There are no easy solutions, and very probably no final solutions of any kind to the educational problems of our cities. But there are vast possibilities still untried and broad ranges of opportunity open to imagination and bold attack Yet it would be a grave error and a stupid miscalculation to think that the public schools should assume these tasks alone, or that they could possibly perform them in isolation.

It is an ironic paradox that the gravest educational deficiencies are ofter found in the very cities that possess the best resources for correcting them. A too often, however, the institutions that harbor these resources -- the universi ties, museums, libraries, scientific agencies, and mass media, all with enormous possibilities for enriching human life -- carry on their work with little awareness of the life of the community in which they stand. In the same cities hundreds of agencies, public and private, with the competence and experience to make critically important contributions to the physical, social, and economi well-being of people, could undergird and supplement educational and cultural efforts.

Even more than resources, we need new initiatives to bring the possibi ties to bear upon the problems, and to breach the walls and bridge the chasms that separate these sovereignties.

No such dream can be made to come true without altering existing political and administrative mechanisms. We shall need new laws, new agenc and new money; but most of all, we need a new vision, newly shared, of what the city at its best might be, and do, and give. Louis Mumford put it well:

> "We must now conceive the city not primarily as a place of business or government, but as an essential organ for expressing and actualizing the new human personality . . . Not industry but education will be the center . . . and every process and function will be approved . . . to the extent that it furthers human development . . . For the city should be an organ of love; and the best economy of cities is the care and culture of men."

Only upon such a conception of the problem of the city and its promise can we project the public policies and the educational processes that are the prerequisites of a free and open society.